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Identity Markers in Rushdie's "In the South"

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Issues of identity occupy central role in Rushdie's works. His writings largely reflect the ground realities that affect identity. His recent short story, "In the South" reflects the issues of identities, particularly placeidentity, in context to age. Most of the characters in the story are old. The responses of these elderly characters towards identities, home and life have been vividly portrayed by Rushdie. This paper observes the story to trace the reflections on different aspects of identity as portrayed in the story. The paper finds that, in this story, Rushdie approves the futility of the narrow issues of identity in human life.

Key Words: Salman Rushdie, Identity, In the South**.**

A superficial reading of Salman Rushdie's short story *In the South,* reflects it to be a narrative on irony of elderly life. But, a deeper study of voice, plot and characters reveals that the story is a strong comment on the complex issues of identities. The story echoes Rushdie's idea of "whole sight" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 20). It tries to answer many questions on identity which are relevant in today's globalised world. Do the issues of identity dissolve with age? What is it that helps humans to overcome the narrow issues of identity apperception? In the contemporary world, when 'borders' are proving futile what does 'identity' and 'rootedness' mean to common man? *In the South,* is a simple attempt to answer to such quests in context to heterogeneity as an inevitable characteristic of human beings. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie clearly accepts the heterogenous nature of identity as: " our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15). Rushdie elaborates on the issues of identity with respect to age in this story- In the South.

The story is a portrait of elderly human lives dangling between life and death, yet unable to shed the traits of roots and identity. Through this story, Rushdie projects a brief but lively account of the intricate aspects of human life, namely- life, roots, identity and end. It is widely believed that issues of identity mellow out with the passing out of time. But in this story Rushdie puts it otherwise. Simply coming of age does not clear the narrow issues of identity rather, assimilation and exposure to other cultures plays major role in refining one's views on identity.

With cultural studies and postcolonial studies emerging as prominent fields in academia, the study of 'identity' in fiction has spurred to a wide extent in recent years. Critical studies on literature of different nations and societies have been engaged more on how identities are pronounced and proclaimed.

The term 'Identity' has been defined differently by different scholars depending on their focal point of interest. The term has been explored by various scholars of different disciplines. The interdisciplinary approaches and the overuse of the term 'identity' in varied disciplines has resulted exponential rise in critical literature focusing 'identity' (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2). Erik Erikson's empirical researches popularized the concept of "identity." Initially "identity" was studied in psychology but its intricate connection to human beings made it so popular that its relevancy proved fertile in sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literature, political science, public administration, cultural studies and public health. Such diversity in studies on "identity" has led to the different definitions of identity. To define, 'identity' is "Self awareness and ability to self reflect" (Hauge, 4). Vignoles agrees, "Identity can refer to the self definition of individuals as well as pair of individuals" (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2). Thus identity plays a major role in human life. To sum, Identity is a conscious assertion of a person's affiliationswhether personal or social. Such assertion is an inevitable causality of the awareness of existence. Identity of a person implies to the stresses on psychological connectivity. Rushdie argues that identity is constructed from different humanly attributes, and is defended throughout the life (*Imaginary Homelands, 12*). Diversified studies on "identity" have not only generated its different interpretations but have also incorporated different dimensions and added complexities. "Identity" is thus a multilayered and multidimensional term, required to be explored from different angles. It must be stated that enrichment in the exploration of the term has brought forth various types of human identities viz.- social, cultural, personal, individual, national, place, economic and contextual. Place is also an important identity marker. It is acknowledged in different terms viz.- country, home, region of residence, work-place and place of belonging. The attachment towards place contributes in the construction of identity. In the postcolonial world where migration is critically studied, "home" has been a critical focus of academic studies. To talk in lay terms, "home" is an aesthetic assertion of "place." Some popular nomenclatures that are used in association to the placerelated-identity are- "sense of place," "place attachment," "place-identity," "place identification," "place-dependence," "placelessness," "rootedness," "insideness," "outsideness," and "topophilia." People interact with the place they live at and affect it through cultural traits. And thus, it is right to say- People affect places, and places influence people (Hauge , 2). The continual interaction between people and place generates an emotional bond between people and place, which in turn forces residents to look at the positive aspects of the place and identify place as an important constituent of their identity. In this way a sense-of-belonging germinates in the residents. This sense-of-belonging, later turns into place-identity, and gets communicated through works, actions and talks. Thus, technically, emotional bonding with a place results in place-identity. However, it is difficult to say "exactly when place attachment becomes strong enough to be defined as place-identity" (Hauge, 2). Extreme sense of attachment to place-identity is described by Tuan as "topophilia," which may generate the feelings of "insider" or "outsider." In extreme

cases topophilia may also result in violence.

Rushdie's story, *In the South* reflects his views on apperception of "place" and "home" as a matter of personal identity with respect to old age. Age and place are important identity-indicators in this story, as the major characters are old and communicate critically on "home" or "place." The story bluntly criticizes and observes the futility of the narrow issues of identity that divides human beings. The story revolves around the lives of two elderly characters named Junior and Senior. Besides these two, the other characters in the story, worth analysis, are- Senior's wife-Arathi, Junior's intimate friend D' Mello and the Poet. The place-identity of the story has been tried to be kept implicit, so as to generalize the story. Rushdie doesn't clearly mention the name of the locale in which the story is set in, yet with references to Eliot's Beach, Marina Beach, Besant Nagar, Besant Nagar Coffee House; it becomes clear that the story is set in Chennai, a metropolitan city in the south of India. Written in author omniscient voice, the story projects the differing views on life, roots and ends through the arguments, quibbles, open criticisms between the two elderly fellows who share a common long name starting with 'V.' This commonality in their name in addition to their age, has just not been a 'curious chance' but a disgusting 'curse' –

> …they shared a name, a long name like so many names of the south, a name that neither of them cared to speak. By banishing the name, by reducing it to its initial letter, "V," they made the rope invisible, which did not mean that it did not exist. (Rushdie, *In the South*, 9)

Their hatred towards the commonality in their name displays their dissatisfaction with each other's personal-identity. Name reflects individual identity and is personal entity in a man's life. Both Junior and Senior love their names but don't want their name to be shared by either. Thus they feel annoyed. The disgust they feel due to commonality in their names implies their denial to compromise their individual identity. They initially reduce their common name to the initial letter and become V. Senior and V. Junior. But later they get it modified as Senior V. and Junior V. Still, the disgust follows them so they prefer to be called by different nicknames- Senior and Junior. 'Senior,' implies to the older fellow who was born just seventeen days before the other.

Identity is mostly central to the conversations between Senior and Junior. But their apperception is quite different. While Senior appears to be broadminded, Junior has a conservative approach. Both, Senior and Junior descend from same clan of Palakkad Aiyars or Iyers; their ages are approximately same and they belong to same city; yet their inclination to the roots differ a lot. While senior is cosmopolitan in attitude, Junior- even at the matured age of eighty-one, is narrowminded ethnocentric. Junior takes no chance in bragging about 'South' (South India), the locality he belongs to. His topophilia clearly comes out in his boast: "Southerners are we, in the south of our city in the south of our country in the south of our continent. God be praised. We are warm, slow, and sensual guys, not like the cold fishes of the north." (Rushdie, In the South, 9).

Place-identity and ethnic-identity are psychological constructs that weave around human mentality. Rushdie supports that the narrow walls of ethnicity, religion, caste, region and gender has bifurcated the human race into various subdivisions. He denounces the fragmentary and narrow ideas on identity. In *Imaginary Homelands* he argues on misinterpretations:

> Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to death. (12)

Rushdie has multiple national-identities but he strongly traces his roots to India. Rushdie's nostalgia for Mumbai his 'lost city,' his "home," has been emotionally affirmed in *Imaginary Homelands*. He avers that the memories of "home" are inseparable from the diaspora writers and they are continuously haunted by some sense of loss (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 10). Rushdie's implicit ties with India are also evident from the fact that he contended long legal battles for his ancestral houses at Solan and New Delhi. His views on Mumbai are paramount to understand his fealty and notions towards it. Rushdie's personal sense-of-place is reflected in the following description of Mumbai in this story:

> Mumbai, on the country's other coast, that city which was neither of the north nor of the south but a frontierville, the greatest, most wondrous, and most dreadful of all such places, the megalopolis of the borderlands, the place of in-between. (Rushdie, *In the South*, 9)

In above lines, Rushdie portrays Mumbai in contrast to Chennai by locating its situation on "other coast." He connotes Mumbai to melting pot, affirming its limitless capacity to integrate different people and culture. He claims Mumbai to be neither belonging to north nor to south to show it as an impartial 'place.' According to narrator's view, Mumbai has remained neutral, unaffected by the narrow issues of identity. The orotund tunes-"the greatest, most wondrous, and most dreadful of all such places, the megalopolis of the borderlands, the place of in-between"- clarifies Rushdie's belief in peace, prosperity, freedom of expression and disconnections with identity.

Rushdie picks up a character from Mumbai and implants him in this story to show 'insider-outsider' perspectives. Junior's retired friend D' Mello had worked with Junior at the water-board for a long time. After his retirement he chooses to settle in the same city where Senior and Junior live (i.e. Chhenai). His visits are eagerly awaited by Junior for he feels his company soothing. Though D' Mello has passed substantial times in Chennai yet he fails to sever his attachment